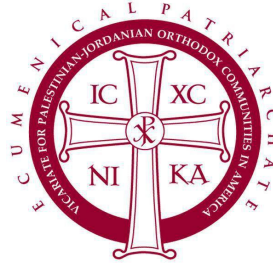


Abstinence and the Blessing of Children in a Pro-Abortion Society



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In the name of the +Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Esteemed fathers and brothers, visitors, guests, and fellow Christians,

I think I have the short straw! Speaking to group of adults after lunch on a Saturday! Food comas beckon us! So, in light of that physiological reality, I'm going to get to the point of my talk directly.

The topic of my talk is abstinence and the blessing of children in a pro-abortion society.

No one likes to talk about abstinence, because it means the fact or practice of restraining oneself from indulging in something. In an instant society, where everything is available instantly on our phones, computers, or televisions, and we can even order something and have it delivered in a few hours (thanks Amazon Prime Now), even the suggestion that we should encourage anyone to restrain themselves in any way, for any purpose, is considered an oppressive laughable idea. Sure, we have Lent, but for the world, Lent is a time to 'give' something up. Usually something you don't want anyway, rather than a gathering in of grace.

Rather than talk about today's society, the latest incarnation of this, I would like to talk about the first pro-abortion society that the Church faced. As a newborn faith in Christ Jesus, the world which Christians immediately and recognizably found themselves in did not believe in abstinence OR the blessing of children at all.

We have forgotten just how deep the cultural revolution that Christianity wrought.

In fact, we forget about it precisely because of how deep it was: There are many ideas that we simply take for granted as natural and obvious, when in fact they didn't exist until the arrival of Christianity changed things completely.

Let's start with abstinence, and the one particular trait that set Christians apart from everyone else in the world.

One Trait that Set Christians Apart

In the first century, while Christianity was still in its infancy, the Greco-Roman world paid no

attention to it. The Church all but escaped detection. For the most part, the early Christian movement was seen as something still underneath the Jewish umbrella, and Jews were just one little group of monotheists in an increasingly cosmopolitan culture.

But in the second century, as Christianity emerged with a distinctive religious identity, the surrounding pagan culture began to take notice. And it didn't like what it saw.

Personally, I have always admired the ancient Roman authorities for their intuition and foresight. Christians were not the first monotheists in the Empire. There were Jews, Zoroastrians, and others and for the most part were completely left alone. But Christians – from the very beginning – from the time Christianity no longer escaped detection - Christians had to be destroyed.

I think the power behind the Roman culture recognized in Christianity its truest, and bitterest enemy, and from that moment forward, it was a no-holds-barred fight to the death.

Christians were seen as strange and superstitious—a peculiar religious movement that undermined the norms of decent society. Christians were - different. And suddenly, they were everywhere! In the army, in the Legion, in the markets, in the Imperial household – nowhere was free of them!

So what was so different about Christians compared to the surrounding Greco-Roman culture? One distinctive trait was that Christians would not pay homage to the other “gods” including in business deals, the professional legal contract required 'swearing an oath' (*sacramentum*) to the gods.

But there was a second trait that separated Christians from pagan culture: something so profound and revolutionary that we no longer recognize how different and powerful an idea it was – and this was the Christian sexual ethic.

While it was not unusual for Roman citizens to have multiple sexual partners, homosexual encounters, regular liaisons with temple prostitutes (priestesses), and unrestrained contact with concubines, servants or slaves, Christians stood out precisely because they refused to engage in any of these practices.

The 2nd century apologist Tertullian went to great lengths to defend Christianity by pointing

out that Christians are generous and share their goods with all those in need. But then he said,

“One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another. All things are common among us but our wives” (Apol. 39).

Why did he say this? Because, in the ancient world, wife-swapping was not an uncommon thing.

In the second-century *Epistle to Diognetus*, the author went out of his way to declare that Christians are normal in what they wear, what they eat, and how they participate in society. However, he then said, that Christians

“share their meals, but not their sexual partners” (Diogn. 5.7).

Again, this trait made Christians different.

We see this distinction play out again in the second-century *Apology* of Aristides. Aristides defended the Christian faith to the emperor Hadrian by pointing out that Christians

“do not commit adultery nor fornication”

A final example comes from the second-century apology of Minucius Felix. In his defense to Octavius, he contrasted the sexual ethic of the pagan world with that of Christians:

“Among the Persians, a promiscuous association between sons and mothers is allowed. Marriages with sisters are legitimate among the Egyptians and in Athens. Your records and your tragedies, which you both read and hear with pleasure, glory in incests: thus also you worship incestuous gods, who have intercourse with mothers, with daughters, with sisters. ...Incest frequently detected among you, and is continually permitted. Miserable men... you scatter your lusts promiscuously...and stray to your own offspring. Thus you continue the story of incest, even although you have no consciousness of your crime.

But we maintain our modesty not in appearance, but in our heart we gladly abide by the bond of a single marriage; in the desire of procreating, we know either one wife, or none at all.”

Clearly, one of the main ways that Christians stood out from their surrounding culture was their distinctive sexual behavior. They abstained from sexual intercourse with everyone but their own lawful spouse, and they had only one.

Needless to say, this history has tremendous implications for Christians today.

We are reminded again that what we are experiencing in the present is not new — Christians battled an over-sexed culture as early as the first and second century. But it is also a reminder why Christians must not go along with the constantly-changing sexual norms of our world. To do so would not only violate the clear teachings of Scripture, but it would also rob us of one of our greatest witnessing opportunities. In as much as marriage reflects Christ's love for the church, Christians' commitment to marriage is a means of proclaiming that love.

In the end, Christianity triumphed in its early Greco-Roman context not because it was the same as the surrounding pagan culture, but because it was different.

Now, you might say,

“Well, Father, what about the Old Testament? What about the Jews? Weren't they also following this kind of sexual ethic?”

Even a cursory reading of the Old Testament demonstrates clearly that neither the Torah, nor the Histories, nor the Psalms, nor the Prophets forbid a man from having multiple wives. Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon are notable examples of biblical figures who wedded more than one wife, and in most of these cases, many more.

Approximately one thousand years ago, the noted German scholar Rabbi Gershom, banned polygamy, among his many reforms on Jewish life. Those who transgressed them were liable to be socially excommunicated, despite the fact that this was common in biblical times, and commonly seen in the Old Testament.

Today, a new organization in Israel, among Orthodox Jews, is trying to reinstate polygamy into mainstream Orthodox Judaism, despite it being against the contemporary norm of Jewish law, and prohibited by the state. It is, they say, the solution to a dearth of males, and an abundance of females in the Jewish population.

Again, we have forgotten just how deep a cultural revolution Christianity wrought.

But strict devotion to monogamy is not the most profound thing which Christianity brought to society. Christianity has invented something unique in human history.

The Invention of Children

I'm talking about our faith's **most profound invention**.

Anyone want to take a guess at what it is?

Our faith's most profound invention is - **the idea of children**.

Today, it is simply taken for granted that the innocence and vulnerability of children makes them beings of particular value, and entitled to particular care. We also romanticize children — their beauty, their joy, their liveliness. Our culture encourages us to let ourselves fall prey to our gooey feelings whenever we look at baby pictures on Facebook. What could be more natural?

In fact, this view of children is a historical oddity.

Those who survived the torture and despair of concentration camps during WW2 and the Soviet era, when asked about the most depressing thing about being in a concentration camp almost always replied – the lack of children. Not being able to see children. Children, to us, represent hope in a way that nothing else does.

But again, this view of children is a historical oddity.

If you disagree, just go back to the view of children that prevailed in Europe's ancient pagan world.

As the historian O.M. Bakke points out in his book *When Children Became People*, in ancient Greece and Rome, and throughout the Fertile Crescent, children were considered nonpersons, only potentially human.

Does that sound familiar?

Didn't the slaveholders in the Southern United States, and throughout Europe, say precisely

the same thing about their African slaves, who were almost all Christian? The same was said of Jews, Armenians, and Slavs by the Nazi state in their propaganda. Don't even get me started on Islam!

Today, feminist and pro-abortion lobbies, support groups, and political machines **all declare that the fetus is not a human person** and therefore not entitled to legal protection or rights, which even endangered species of animals have under our law.

The fathers of the Church say just the opposite. In fact, they admit no distinction between the unformed embryo and the fully formed child for the Christian Church, and accept no distinction either.

By contrast, various pagan authors describe children as being more like plants than human beings.

And this had concrete consequences.

Take, for example, the Canaanite god Moloch (from the root *mlk*, for “king” from which we get Melkite, for example) Moloch was a bronze statue heated with fire into which the victims were thrown.

Moloch is not just a local Canaanite phenomenon either. He has been associated with the child sacrifices in Carthage to Baal Hammon, the Chief God of Carthage. Recent archaeological excavations have produced solid evidence for child sacrifice in Carthage as well as inscriptions including the name *MLK*. The Israelite worship of Moloch wasn't abolished until Babylonian captivity. (Although the Babylonian religion was pantheistic and included astrology and divination, it did not include human sacrifice.)

Plutarch wrote in *De Superstitione* 171:

... but with full knowledge and understanding they themselves offered up their own children, and those who had no children would buy little ones from poor people... meanwhile the mother stood by without a tear or moan; but should she utter a single moan or let fall a single tear, she had to forfeit the money, and her child was sacrificed nevertheless; and the whole area before the statue was filled with a loud noise of flutes and drums that the cries of wailing should not reach the ears of the people.

Diodorus also relates that when Agathocles defeated Carthage, the Carthaginian nobles believed they had displeased Moloch by substituting low-born children for their own children. They attempted to make amends by sacrificing 200 children of the best families at once, and in their enthusiasm actually sacrificed 300 children.

It all sounds like the setting to a bad Hercules movie – but this was not only real, it was widespread, well accepted, and even common.

How could this be allowed to happen?

That was the norm back then. Today, due to the revolutionary influence of Christianity, civilized people can no longer even tolerate such thoughts, nor entertain their return.

In the ancient world, according to historical sociologists, the entire social worldview was undergirded by an implicit, universally-held view: Society was organized in concentric rings of status, with the circle at the center containing the highest value people, and the people in the outside circles having little-to-no value.

At the center in the ancient world was the freeborn, adult male, and other persons were valued depending on how 'close' they were to the freeborn, adult male. Such was the lot of foreigners, slaves, women, women slaves,...and children.

In spite of what we see in Hollywood movies, well-to-do and wealthy parents of the ancient world typically did not even interact with their own children, leaving them up to be raised by slaves. Children, as a result, were brought up with very strong beatings as a normal part of education. And in Rome, a child's father had the right to kill him for whatever reason until he came of age. What a great relief for those who made it to puberty!

One of the most notorious ancient practices that Christianity rebelled against was the frequent practice of *expositio*, basically the abandonment of unwanted infants. Of course, girls were abandoned much more often than boys, which meant that Roman society had an extremely one sided gender ratio, contributing to its violence, and explaining their bent towards war. Sexual tension was high at all times.

Most sexual acts were permissible, as long as they involved a person of higher status dominating a person of lower status. This meant that, according to all the evidence we have,

the sexual abuse of children (particularly boys) was rife.

This demonic practice in the ancient world was regular, common, and accepted. It is sometimes pointed to paganism's greater tolerance (though by no means full acceptance) of homosexuality than Christianity as evidence for its higher moral standing, but nothing could be further from the truth. But this is to look at a world we can no longer even imagine through very distorting lenses.

Lest we blame the Romans for inventing this crime, it was not a uniquely Roman idea. Going back before 3,000 BC, the ancient Mesopotamians likewise valued the freeborn adult male above all others. Women were mostly property, and children could be abandoned, killed, or sold into slavery at any time. A malformed infant was considered an evil omen. And had to be disposed of by a ritual and then by throwing their bodies into a river.

Omen collections and magical texts carefully describe infant and childhood diseases, but in their medical texts, which prescribe treatments, there is not one mention of treatment of infant or childhood maladies.

Most abandoned children died — but some were “rescued,” almost always raised as slaves. And the most profitable way for a small child slave to earn money was as a sex slave. Brothels specializing in child sex slaves, particularly boys, were established as completely legal and thriving businesses in ancient Rome. One source reports that sex with castrated boys was regarded as a particular treat.

Of course, the rich didn't have to bother with brothels — they had all the rights to abuse their slaves (and even their children) as they pleased.

This is the world into which Christianity came, condemning abortion and infanticide as loudly and as early as it could.

This is the world into which Christianity came, calling attention to children and ascribing special worth to them.

But really, Christianity's invention of children — that is, **its invention of the cultural idea of children as precious and treasured human beings** — was really an outgrowth of its most radical, unacceptable, and revolutionary idea:\

the radical equality, and the infinite value, of every single human being as a beloved child of God.

If the God who made heaven and Earth chose to reveal himself, not as an emperor, but as a poor man shamefully punished on the cross, then no one could claim higher value than anyone else on the basis of earthly status. Even the Greek ideal that all men were equal only applied to free born men!

This idea that children were something special, precious and inherently valuable was so revolutionary an idea, and it changed human culture so much that we no longer even recognize it.

Today

And here we are today. Once again in a Pro-Abortion Society that sees Christianity as odd, peripheral, and dangerous. Sexual perversion struggling to find its way to acceptance by any means necessary. Pedophilia excused as a culturally acceptable practice, and those who strike out to protect their victims arrested as criminals! Children as less than human, and out of control sexual practices encouraged, and considered unrestrainable.

And Christian morality again mocked as impractical, and unrealistic!

Now, don't get me wrong. America's transition to a pagan, secularist, or socialist state is not complete, and by no means a bygone conclusion. The last election demonstrated that the cultural revolution which Christianity has wrought remains deeply seated in western civilization (another enemy of our enemy, since it is based largely on Christianity!).

Someone asked me once about heaven, hell, and the afterlife in the Orthodox understanding.

I told them that the Orthodox understand the life after death, and the life after that especially, to be the experience of reality. No more delusion. No more guessing. Harsh reality.

We will see the truth about God. We will see the truth about ourselves. We will see the truth of every person. The reality of our state will be impossible to avoid. No eyelids to close to shut it out, no corner to hide in. Men will cry to the mountains and hills

"Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath

of the Lamb!" (Rev. 6:16)

What is this wrath? The vision of reality.

A Vacuum in Vision leads to Tyranny

Nature abhors a vacuum, and as the Scripture says ,

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

A well known, but incomplete quote from Proverbs 29:18. The rest of the verse says,

but blessed is he who keeps the law.

The prophetic vision of the Church is what the enemy wants to destroy. Without prophetic vision, the world loses its soul, and shortly afterwards, its mind.

The Church has deeply changed culture and society with these simple commitments, to loving one spouse, and the protection of children as something infinitely valuable, but she must remain adamant in her devotion to these morals, because the choices are Christ or perdition.

In the first century document, *The Didache* (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), the first Christian catechism, it begins with these words.

There are two ways. One of life and one of death, and there is a very great difference between the two ways.

And this documents lists fornication, adultery and abortion among the ways of death. It has never been unclear to Christians, and it never will be. We know the difference between the way of life, and the way of death.

Either the Church breathes life into society or Church goes silent and safely irrelevant, society devours itself and disintegrates into lawless and unrestrained passion, leaving mankind little more animalistic, and all but incapable of free action, and dependent on instinct alone.

Our commitment to our Lord, to the Way of Life, and to holy living is cornerstone of godly revolution in human history, a revolution so different, so profound, and so deep, that we no

longer even recognize our previous state as historical reality.

We have done it for 2,000 years with success. We will not stop revolutionizing society now.

+ + +

I'd like to close with an unusual quotation.

This is from Cecil B. DeMille (1881–1959), Academy Award-winning film producer, who came out on stage at the beginning of his 1956 film *The Ten Commandments*. It was not seen on television once, despite annual airings of this movie for decades, and only came to light now that the movie is available on YouTube and DVD. DeMille comes out before the movie begins, and says this:

“Ladies and Gentlemen, young and old. This may seem an unusual procedure, speaking to you before the picture begins, but we have an unusual subject: the story of the birth of freedom. The story of Moses.”

“The theme of this picture is whether men ought to be ruled by God’s laws or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Rameses. Are men the property of the State or are they free souls under God?

“This same battle continues throughout the world today.”